SUDOVIA

An Archeo-Mythological Study of the Possible Religious and Institutional Structures of the Yotvingians

A Critical-Comparative Model of Reconstruction • Working Paper Edition

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a comparative and critically grounded reconstruction of the possible cosmological and socio-religious structures of the Yotvingians (Sudovians), a Baltic-speaking group of the medieval eastern Baltic region. Due to the absence of indigenous written sources, the study integrates three categories of evidence: external medieval chronicles, archaeological material (primarily funerary contexts), and comparative Baltic and Indo-European religious models.

The analysis does not aim at reconstructing a historically verifiable religious system, but rather at constructing a plausible interpretive model that accounts for recurring structural patterns observable across Baltic religious traditions. Particular attention is given to cosmological structuring, ritual landscapes, funerary practices, and the possible social distribution of ritual knowledge.

Keywords: Yotvingians, Sudovians, Baltic mythology, archeo-mythology, tripartite cosmology, Peter of Dusburg, funerary rituals, interpretatio christiana.

1. INTRODUCTION: SOURCES, LIMITS, AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The reconstruction of Yotvingian religious beliefs is fundamentally constrained by the absence of indigenous textual sources. As a result, scholarly understanding must rely on a triangulation of indirect evidence: external narrative accounts, archaeological data, and comparative ethnographic and linguistic analysis.

The primary textual corpus consists of medieval chronicles, most notably Peter of Dusburg's *Chronicon terrae Prussiae*, as well as Ruthenian annalistic traditions such as the *Hypatian Chronicle*. These texts were produced in ideological contexts shaped by Christian missionary and military perspectives, often resulting in interpretative distortions, including demonization and the systematic reinterpretation of indigenous practices through Christian conceptual frameworks (*interpretatio christiana*).

Archaeological evidence, particularly from burial complexes in the Suwałki region, provides a more stable empirical basis. Cremation rites, structured burial mounds, horse interments, and deliberate destruction of grave goods form a coherent material pattern, although their ideological interpretation remains necessarily speculative.

Finally, Baltic and Indo-European comparative studies provide the principal heuristic framework for reconstructing possible structural continuities in religious thought, particularly through parallels with Prussian and Lithuanian religious systems.

All conclusions presented here should therefore be understood as probabilistic models rather than empirical reconstructions.

2. COSMOLOGICAL STRUCTURE: A TRIPARTITE MODEL

Comparative Baltic mythology suggests that Yotvingian cosmology may plausibly be reconstructed as a vertically structured tripartite system.

2.1 The Uranian Sphere

The upper cosmological level is associated with the sky, atmospheric phenomena, and celestial order. Within comparative frameworks, this domain is linked to sovereignty, cosmic regulation, and meteorological forces.

2.2 The Terrestrial Sphere

The middle layer corresponds to the human world, inhabited by both humans and various forms of localized numinous presence. This sphere functions as a mediating zone between celestial and chthonic realms.

2.3 The Chthonic Sphere

The lowest cosmological layer is associated with earth, water, death, and decomposition. Rather than functioning as a moralized “underworld,” it is better understood in Baltic comparative perspective as a regenerative domain connected to ancestry and biological renewal.

2.4 Axis Mundi

A recurrent motif in Baltic religious traditions is the concept of a cosmic axis connecting the three layers of reality. In the Yotvingian context, this role may hypothetically have been fulfilled by sacred trees (especially oaks) or prominent natural topographic features serving as ritual focal points.

3. SACRED SPACE AND POSSIBLE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

The religious system of the Yotvingians can be tentatively modeled as a decentralized ritual network, lacking strong institutional centralization but containing nodal points of sacral concentration.

3.1 Supra-Local Ritual Centers

By analogy with the Prussian cult center of Romowe and based on the distribution of toponyms containing the element *alkas*, it is plausible that certain locations functioned as supra-local ritual hubs. These sites may have served for:

- inter-group negotiation,
- ritual legitimization of political decisions,
- coordination of large-scale ceremonial practices.

3.2 Local and Clan-Based Sanctuaries

At the micro-regional level, religious practice appears to have been strongly embedded in kinship-based structures. Sacred groves likely functioned as clan-associated ritual spaces, within which ritual authority was distributed rather than centralized.

Priests or ritual specialists should therefore be understood not as members of a formal hierarchy, but as a distributed category of religious experts, whose authority derived from both knowledge and social position within kinship networks.

4. RELIGION AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Religious practice in Yotvingian society likely exhibited significant internal differentiation corresponding to social structure.

4.1 Elite and Warrior Religion

Elite groups appear to have engaged in ritual forms associated with sovereignty, warfare, and oath-making. Within this sphere, sacred practice was performative and public, often linked to legitimization of authority and martial success.

4.2 Agrarian and Domestic Religion

The majority of the population likely participated in religious practices oriented toward fertility, subsistence stability, and protection from environmental and supernatural threats. These practices were embedded in everyday life and closely linked to household and agricultural cycles.

Rather than constituting separate religious systems, these modes of religiosity should be understood as different modalities of engagement with a shared symbolic universe.

5. FUNCTIONAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PANTHEON

Instead of a fixed pantheon of anthropomorphic deities, Baltic religious systems are more appropriately interpreted through a functional model of divine forces, consistent with Indo-European comparative theory.

- **5.1 Sovereign-Ordering Function:** Associated with cosmic regulation, law, and atmospheric phenomena.
- **5.2 Vital-Economic Function:** Connected to fertility, agricultural productivity, and biological continuity.
- **5.3 Destructive-Transformative Function:** Linked to decay, death, and cyclical regeneration.

These categories should be understood as analytical constructs rather than direct historical entities.

6. DIVINATION AND SYMBOLIC PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Comparative evidence suggests that Baltic ritual systems often integrated divinatory practices into decision-making processes. These may have included:

- interpretation of animal behavior,
- reading of fire and smoke patterns,
- observation of birds of prey.

Material culture also indicates the presence of apotropaic symbolism. Ornamentation such as geometric motifs and pendants (e.g., lunulae) likely functioned simultaneously as identity markers, protective symbols, and culturally embedded aesthetic forms.

7. RITUAL TIME AND SEASONAL CYCLES

Ritual activity appears to have been closely aligned with astronomical cycles, particularly solstices and equinoxes.

The summer solstice likely represented a period of intensified ritual activity associated with fire, water, and fertility symbolism. Conversely, the autumn-winter transition may have been associated with ancestral rituals and commemorative practices linked to the cyclical perception of life and death.

8. FUNERARY PRACTICES AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LOGIC

Archaeological evidence confirms the prevalence of cremation as a dominant funerary practice. Within a symbolic interpretive framework, fire may be understood as a transformative medium facilitating transition between ontological states.

The systematic destruction of grave goods, particularly weapons, may reflect a ritual logic of “deactivation” or symbolic transformation, ensuring the transition of objects into a non-ordinary ontological domain.

Horse burials further suggest the symbolic importance of equids as mediators between worlds, potentially functioning as psychopompic figures within funerary ideology.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS: MODEL, EVIDENCE, AND EPISTEMIC BOUNDARIES

The reconstruction presented here should be understood as a layered interpretive model composed of:

- empirically grounded archaeological data (high reliability),
- moderately reliable Baltic comparative parallels (moderate certainty),

• and theoretical extrapolations (probabilistic models).

Rather than offering a definitive account of Yotvingian religion, this study aims to articulate a structured hypothesis of how such a system might be coherently modeled within the constraints of available evidence.

10. REFERENCES (SELECTED & FORMATTED IN CHICAGO STYLE)

Antoniewicz, Jerzy. *Bałtowie Zachodni we wczesnym średniowieczu: Zarys historii i kultury* [Western Balts in the Early Middle Ages]. Olsztyn: Pojezierze, 1979.

Beresnevičius, Gintaras. *Religijotyra: Įvadas į religijų istoriją ir teoriją* [Introduction to the History and Theory of Religions]. Vilnius: Tyto alba, 1997.

Brückner, Aleksander. *Starożytna Litwa: Ludy i bogi. Szkice historyczne i mitologiczne* [Ancient Lithuania: Peoples and Gods]. Warsaw: Księgarnia naukowa, 1904. Reprint, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985.

Długosz, Jan. *Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae* [Annals or Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland]. 12 vols. Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1964–2005.

Engel, Marcin. *Jaćwież: Archeologiczne badania stratyfikacji społecznej wczesnośredniowiecznych plemion bałtyjskich* [Yotvingia: Archaeological Studies of Social Stratification]. Warsaw: Państwowe Muzeum Archeologiczne, 2018.

Hypatian Chronicle. In *Polnoe Sobranie Russkikh Letopisei* [Complete Collection of Ruthenian Chronicles], vol. 2. St. Petersburg: Tipografija Eduarda Praca, 1908.

Okulicz-Kozaryn, Łucja. *Życie codzienne Prusów i Jaćwingów we wczesnym średniowieczu* [Daily Life of the Prussians and Yotvingians in the Early Middle Ages]. Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1983.

Peter of Dusburg. *Chronicon terrae Prussiae*. In *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum*, edited by Max Toeppen, vol. 1. Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1861.

Toporov, Vladimir N. *Baltų mitologijos ir ritualo tyrimai* [Studies in Baltic Mythology and Ritual]. Vilnius: Mintis, 1989.

Vėlius, Norbertas. *The World Outlook of the Ancient Balts*. Vilnius: Mintis, 1989.